

How Should We Pray?

March 12, 2006, Mark Statler

This is our second week in the series, “Can you hear me now?”. What we’re doing is looking at the prayer life of Jesus and using his models to teach and lead us into a meaningful life of prayer.

There is a place in Luke 11 where the disciples, who have noticed how important prayer is to Jesus, ask to teach them HOW to pray. That’s what we’re going to look at today. How should we pray? Because for some of us, praying isn’t easy, especially praying in public. We might feel kind of like Whoopi Goldberg in SisterAct. She’s on the run from some bad guys and decides to hide out in a convent. So she puts on a habit and goes in. Presuming her to be a nun from another convent, the sisters welcome her and at the first meal, ask her if she’d like to pray. Take a look.

Does that look like your prayer life? Maybe it does! Many of us here are probably not far ahead of Whoopi. So we’re going to ask How Should We Pray?

Basic Points About Prayer From Mt.6:5-8 – Read the scripture.

A. BE SINCERE. (verse 5) Don’t be like hypocrites and make a display. If you pray to impress others you are using God. You’ve already received your reward. Do you know who excels at this? PREACHERS! You know, sometimes my motives get mixed up. I want my prayer to be authentic, but I also want people to say, “Wasn’t that a good prayer?” Well Jesus says, if someone says that then I’ve already received my reward! Don’t make a show out of prayer. What God cares about more are the prayers you pray at home, in private, on your knees. The ones you don’t get credit for from anyone else. Be sincere. Be careful about your motives, God cares about motives.

B. FIND A QUIET PLACE. (verse 6)

Go to your room and shut the door. Get away from distractions. Jesus constantly went away, on his own, to pray. He got away from crowds and even his closest friends. We have so much noise. We need to find a quiet place. Not just audible noise (noise of busyness). Find or create a quiet place, free from distractions.

C. PRAY CONVERSATIONALLY (verse 7-8)

Don’t keep babbling on and on (repeating the same things). Speak conversationally. Not rote prayers, not in flowery language, and not in a preacher voice! If you really want to learn to pray, just pull up an empty chair next to yours & visualize Jesus being in that chair and have a conversation. Aaron reminded us last week that conversations include both talking and listening!

Jesus Teaches A Pattern For Prayer

The Lord’s Prayer is a pattern for praying, it is an outline for praying- Jesus was not saying this is all you pray.... “pray just this(say the prayer) and you’re covered”. He was telling his followers to pray in this way! Look at phrases and what they mean. I hope you will find this helpful, because that’s exactly what we’re going to do at this point. We’re going to use it as a template or outline, not as the complete prayer, but as a tool to launch your prayers.

Our Father

Jesus spoke in a language called Aramaic. And the Aramaic word Jesus uses here is Abba or Dad. Not so much Daddy, but Dad. It's not quite as casual as "daddy", but it does reflect an intimate, close relationship. It makes me think of the intimate, loving, relationships I have with my children. The deep love I feel for them – and then to think that that love I have for them is just a shadow of love God has for me – for you. That's what Jesus is pointing to when he says, Abba-Dad. God desires this intimate relationship with us.

But let's look at the first word, the one before "Father". Have you ever thought about that word? What is it saying? He didn't tell us to say, "My Father", but he said "Our Dad"! That means – this loving Heavenly Dad who wants an intimate relationship with me also wants to have that same relationship with others. That makes us all children. I know we're the church and we're all God's children – so that means we never get any sibling rivalries going, right? We're Christians, so we never have envy or jealousy. No sins and angers. No judgments, no grudges hold, right.? And what the word "our" is reminding us is that God is bigger than our pettiness.

It's like when Jesus told us to love our enemies. Why? Because, our enemies share OUR father with us! So try praying this phrase this way. Change it to: "Lord, you are my heavenly dad, and your _____'s heavenly dad. Put the name of someone you're holding a grudge against or can't forgive or are angry with in that blank.

Who art in heaven...

Where does God live? God lives everywhere, right? Heaven can mean the cosmos! God is only one who can see the farthest reaches of the universe. We can use this phrase to remember the magnitude of God and of God's power.

Heaven call also mean our ultimate destination. When this life is over we will be in heaven with the father. That means, as we say this phrase that we don't fear the future. We don't fear death. We are proclaiming our faith in the God who defeated death and share eternal life with us.

Heaven, according to Jesus, was not just the ultimate destination, it was also a present reality. It is the new life we experience when we accept God's gift of salvation and the freedom from the past and from our sins. Heaven is not just the future hope, it is the present reality. And so this phrase helps us remember that heaven is also on earth; God has placed it in us!

Hallowed be thy name...

When I lived in Scotland, I served as an associate pastor at a Church of Scotland church. I was just out of seminary, and this was one of my first Sunday's there. I already knew that I needed to type out the Lord's Prayer. You never know when you're going to have a brain freeze. So anyway, I typed out the Lord's Prayer and kept it with my stuff during the service.

The senior pastor saw my notes, then took at second glance. All this was during the service, and he put his finger on this phrase in the Lord's Prayer and said, "Did you mean to change the nature of God?" I thought to myself, "what is this guy talking about?" Then I looked down at my notes to discover that I had typed "Hollowed be thy name!" There's a big difference between a hollow God and a hallowed God!

Hallowed basically means "holy", and this is the phrase of praise! We're invited to praise God, acknowledge God's greatness and glory. One way to do this is to sing songs of praise like the ones we sang today, or like "Lord I lift your name on high!" That song is all

about hallowing God, or calling out to God in praise and reverence. It is about giving God the rightful place in our hearts, and standing in awe of God.

As I've mentioned, a great way to do this in your prayer time is to sing praises. You can use a worship CD if that helps, but remember God doesn't need the background track. In fact, God doesn't even need you to sing in tune. Just lift up your voice! Another way to do this is to read the Psalms that are praise oriented (not all are).

It's important to notice that praising God comes first, then we're ready to move into prayers of petition, when we're asking God for something.

Thy Kingdom Come

And the first thing we ask is for God's kingdom to come. Do you really understand what we're asking here? Praying for this should frighten us! Frederick Buechner said, "It takes guts for us to ask this unless we are just going through the motions without meaning it." Think about it. If God's kingdom came in full and total reality tomorrow, what would change? A better question may be, "What would not change?"

This petition is really an invitation to God to come and change us, transform our lives more and more into Kingdom likeness. But to get the totality of that change in one dose would be scary to say the least. But daily, step by step, we're inviting God to change us bit by bit more and more into his image. More and more in to resurrection powered people with a burning passion to share God's love with others; more and more to lead us away from self-serving and into selflessly giving our lives away for others. It would be scary for all of that to happen at once, but day by day and step by step, we ask for the Kingdom of God to become a reality in our life. And an extension of God's kingdom being built in our lives, we pledge our lives to become Kingdom Builders, sharing God's love with others. And just who is it that God prefers to use to accomplish his desires? Us...people. We are God's favorite tool to build the Kingdom of Heaven.

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven...

The reason we need to pray "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" is because God's will is not normally done on earth.

Roberta Bondi wrote a book on her understandings of the Lord's Prayer and she tells a story of a young woman named Sarah, who was brutally beaten and raped. When Roberta went to see her, Sarah asked, "What did I do that was so bad that God would punish me with this?"

Sarah, this is not God's will.

Niki was a seventh grader when I first met her. She told me that she couldn't believe in God. I asked her why and here's her story. Her father died when Niki was in 3rd grade of some rare disease. Someone from her church was going through the line and was probably trying to give her some assurance when they said, "It was just God's will".

No, Niki, it wasn't.

We have to pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven because earth is precisely the one place that God's will is not normally done; accidents, tragedies, crime, disasters, diseases, these are not God's will.

I have clergy colleagues and friends who so strongly believe in the sovereignty of God that they believe that everything that happens has been planned and ordered by God. But I can't go there. There are just too many things in this world that happen that in no way reflect God's kingdom and there are other, more plausible reasons for these things other than that God has ordered it. There are people who choose to do expressly evil things; we live in a

broken world; people have free will and they sometimes exercise that free will in ways that hurt themselves or innocent others.

Now when we're praying, "thy will be done on earth...", we're not saying Kay Serah, Serah, whatever will be will be. It is not in a defeated, non-involved way that we say, "Go ahead, God, and do whatever your going to do."

This is not a defeated prayer, this is a demanding prayer! "Lord please, make your will break into this world! And Lord, start with me. Let your will be done here in my heart as it is in heaven. Bring your will to this world that is in so much need of it, and start right here."

Finally, after we have submitted our will to God, we're ready to ask for other things.

Give us this day our daily bread...

Many of us have a long grocery list of things we pray for, and Aaron is going to talk about what kinds of things we should pray for in a few weeks. What Jesus is guiding us to do with this phrase is to ask God to bring his power into the present (today) to give us what we need, not necessarily what we want!

And there are at least three ways we can interpret our daily bread.

1. For God to provide for our daily nutritional needs. I've never gone hungry a day in my life. Most of us haven't. So it's tempting to dismiss this angle. But there's that little plural word in this sentence....US...give us this day. So this request is about more than just me. And there are millions of people who don't know where their next meal is coming from. I've witnessed the faith of people in Nicaragua who don't know where their next meal is coming from, and all I can say is that their faith is amazing...literally depending upon God for essentials that I take for granted. This phrase doesn't just remind US about all the hungry people out there, it calls us to action. It calls us who have plenty to do more to become God's daily provision for others.
2. Of course our daily bread goes way beyond our nutritional needs. Jesus called himself the bread of life, meaning that he is the "food" that satisfies the deepest hungers of our soul. When we're asking for our daily bread, we're also asking for Jesus to address our deeper, inner needs.

This is a good time in this model of prayer to ask Jesus to teach us about our desires; to help us distinguish between essentials and wants, as well as keep our focus on what God is doing today. We're not to get too tied up about the past or overly focused about the future. Look for God's daily provisions with a sense of gratitude and blessing.

Forgive us our trespasses...

Now we're entering an obvious time of introspection. This is a time to look inside and do a fearless moral inventory. This takes time, and it also takes some brutal honesty with yourself. Look at your life, your values, your decisions, and actions and see what stands the test of God's approval and what fails. And in confidence, we invite God to take away all that does not stand.

Now just as a side note: three different versions of this section. Some traditions use trespasses, some debts, and some use sin. The first English translation of the Bible was in 1380 by Miles Coverdale and he translated it as trespasses. The King James uses debts, but by that time "trespasses" was in common use throughout the Church in England and it still is. Our church comes out of the Church of England, so we continue to use trespasses. Churches whose roots come out of continental Europe tend to use "debts". And now some

newer versions use “sins”. It really doesn’t matter which word is used, they mean the same thing.

But notice what happens next...forgive us...

As we forgive those who trespass against us

Here is what we’re really saying. “God, to the same degree that I am willing to forgive other people, forgive me.”

That’s scary, right? Is there anyone in here that can’t think of someone who gets under your skin? Or how about someone who wounded us? Someone we are holding a grudge against? Oh yah! Easily.

This ought to pierce our soul. Forgiveness is so critical to God that God wants the forgiveness he extends even though we don’t deserve it and can’t earn it, God wants that forgiveness extended through us. And yet, we can’t. or we don’t.

We are unwilling, lots of times. What have we prayed already, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done”. God’s will is for us to extend the forgiveness we have undeservedly received to others we think don’t deserve our forgiveness. This is not easy.

But maybe today is the day that God is prompting you to let go of your grudges. Is today the day you finally learn to forgive? Is today the day you experience the two-fold freedom of both receiving and giving forgiveness?

God is ready! God wants to unleash grace and mercy and walk closer to you, but you have been pushing God away, holding the fullness of all these blessings at arm’s length because you’ve refused to forgive?

Don’t ask God to do for you what you are unable to do for others! Let today be the day. We’re going to pray this prayer later and we’re going to pause after this phrase – let today be the day!

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...

Has anyone else out there come to this last line and wondered, “what is that really saying?” I mean what exactly does this mean. Does God actually lead us into temptation and now we’re asking God to do something God wants to do? James says that God never tempts anyone, so how do we reconcile that?

Or IF God is leading us toward temptations, like Jesus was led to go to the wilderness to be tempted, what should we do? Should we go to that temptation because it is God’s will? What exactly are we praying here?

To me, the real problem is not that God is leading into temptation, but that we do that to ourselves! There are lots of temptations out there! Think of a temptation you face all the time...the bigger the better. Do you have one in your mind? Think of some enticement to sin, some temptation you face with the potential to disappoint God, or someone else, or even yourself.

Now, keep that in your mind. That is not your biggest temptation. Your biggest temptation, my biggest temptation, is to face the temptation you have in your mind right now out of your own strength!

Celine Mangan says, “Our greatest temptation is to desire to be left alone with only our own resources to face the onslaught of evil.” When we pray for God to “lead us not into temptation”, we are inviting God to get into the struggle with us! We’re pleading with God to use his power in our life to LEAD US AWAY from the temptation to do life and face temptations on our own.

We cannot overcome the power of evil on our own. We need God's help! We need God to deliver us from evil! One of the last century's greatest theologians, Karl Barth, rewrote this phrase into his own words like this,

"Lead us, for we are your children, saved through Jesus Christ. Spare us not from struggle, which we must accept, not from sufferings which we must endure, but spare us from the encounter with this enemy who is stronger than our strength and more clever than our intelligence."

This is an invitation to God to intervene and save us from ourselves – our tendency to think we're strong enough. Lead us away from that temptation, Lord, and let us learn to rely on your strength and power.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever...

This is the doxology, the closing praise. It was not part of Jesus original prayer in either Matthew or Luke's version, but it was common practice to add this line to the Lord's prayer by the end of the first century. It actually comes from I Chronicles 29, and it serves as a praise recap or reprise. It reminds me of the "hallowed" or praise section earlier in the prayer. It reminds us that our prayer is to the king of kings, lord of lords, and the power above all power. This is our heavenly Dad, and we lift up this prayer to him with all praise and honor, because it is through the grace of this amazing God that we can live a triumphant and abundant life.

As we close today, I'd like to invite you to pray this prayer with me. We're not going to all say it. I will speak it, you just follow along in your minds, and we'll take a few pauses as we go through the prayer to allow you some time to take that thought and extend it into your own prayer.